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Dark Imagination: The Locus of Delightful Shudders¹

by

c. w. spinks

As a semiotician, I have long been fascinated with constructions of the human imagination—myth, literature, art, dreams, fantasies, hallucinations, lies, etc, for I think an examination of such semiotic oddities is necessary for a semiotic pretending to a scientific standard, despite the epistemological difficulty of dealing with sign constructs which are not “true”. Of course, constructs which are mythic, ennobling, inspiring or characterized by any of the markers that we usually give to high art are believed to have enough “substance” that semioticians will still try to examine them even if they are epistemologically problematic. However, this is not especially true of those constructs with less substance, which are just as fascinating, deceptive, or manipulative unless the critic wishes to exorcize their negative qualities or to correct the users in some way. Rather when we examine “low” culture, we tend to catalog it or study it for other more “serious” purposes, but we almost always distance ourselves from it in some deflecting way².

This deflection has been particularly true of the Gothic strain³ in literature and film—something thought to be lurid, cheap, and/or adolescent, more for the circus and the freak show than serious art, something that belongs in the tabloids not in scholarly journals. Yet if you have ever ridden a roller coaster the second time, or asked for a ghost story on a dark night, or seen a

horror movie twice; if you have ever rubber-necked at an accident or thrilled to someone's tragic story, or even enjoyed your own nightmares, then you probably are a practitioner of what I will call *the dark imagination*, whether it meets your aesthetic and scholarly standards or not. Such thrills, such chills, such shudders seem to have been with us a long time—perhaps in the guise of Lascaux cave initiations or just the description of a hunt's adventures, or perhaps in the apocalyptic tales of a god's vengeance or the warning tales of a conqueror's practices, but certainly in the guise of the horror narrative, the frightening tale, and the Gothic.⁴ We apparently delight in being frighten⁵, for whatever the gothic touches, it touches something fundamental in us and we often thrill to its touch.

Usually when we give high cultural marks to the imagination, we take it to be the source of invention, innovation, discovery, and creativity. As Morris Peckham suggests in *Man's Rage for Chaos*, aesthetically we tend to believe that art is an instrument of order. Our basic aesthetic expectation is that when culture deals with the disturbing, it uses art, as an some sort of Aristotelian catharsis, to control the destructive and to give vent to disruptive emotions. In short, under such a view, the imagination and art are agents of order, but despite that view there is a dark side to the imagination—a zone where what is normally repellant becomes attractive, what is normally forbidden becomes compulsory, or what is normally rejected becomes acceptable. Even our language speaks to this demarcation with regular and frequent attempts to represent a boundary between approved and disapproved uses of the imagination. For example, we really do speak of “high” and “low” art—giving tacit approval to the former and forever making the act of creativity suspect by its contamination with the later. Or we make myth an ambivalent term, meaning on the one hand the very soul of a culture or on the other its most pernicious lies; or we do the same to dreams, making it either the goals or aspirations of a person, or the useless

musings in someone's night or day. Or, by the same token, we say fantasies liberate or enslave, and fancies function as amusements or perversions. We see negative memories as a compensatory working through a problem or as ghosts keeping us locked in the past. We continually judge such sign constructs in terms of their social impact; in short, like Wittgenstein says of the purpose of classification, the value of our imaginations and their constructs seems to be the use we put them to.

However, in a semiotic study of such things, what one has to do first, rather than just resorting to an explanation by Aristotelian catharsis, to appeal to Coleridge's "willful suspension of disbelief", or even to use Wittgensteinean logo-pragmatic distance, is to face cultural belief head-on and literally and willfully suspend cultural judgment⁶ in order to pay particular attention to how cultural boundaries are used. For example, the difference in cultural validation between a "vision" and an "hallucination", between "self- confidence" and "self-deception", between "self-expression" and "perversion", or between "habit" and "addiction", just to name a few, are clearly part of a cultural attempt to adjudicate those particular boundaries. I would argue that the division between imagination and dark imagination is as good a distinction as any because it clearly owns the problematic nature of the sign processes and yet allows a distinction between cultural approval and disapproval without too much cultural control. Still as we all know, cultural disapproval does not mean that there is no attraction to the darker side, rather it is almost certain that there is eternal attraction toward the dark side that shows up again and again in our narratives—perhaps to allow us to understand our own limitations, perhaps to teach us our cultural roles, perhaps to meet some hunger that culture does not suffice, or perhaps the human mind just abhors someoneelse's negative. Whatever, the dark imagination fascinates us and calls us whether it fits neatly into our semiotic schemes or cultural schemes or not; to recognize the

ambivalence of the dark is a first step in understanding how it works culturally and semiotically.

Interior Space and the Dark Imagination

For the last few years, I have used a Gothic theme, what I call here the dark imagination, to teach my survey classes in British Literature. It could be nothing more than a somewhat cheap device to catch the interest of students, who are more cinematic than literary, in how wonderfully “low brow” the “high brow” literature of Romantic and Victorian eras can be, but even so, it is an insightful device that shows the Gothic elements of the 19th century as an overlooked, but prevalent aspect of a newly massified literary culture. Students often claim that they do not know what I mean by the dark imagination, and although typical definitions of repression, Jungian Shadow, and Freudian deflection and projection never seem to make sense to them, they nevertheless follow the Gothic elements as easily as the “children of the night” follow their prey, and it introduces them to a whole host of cultural, literary, and semiotic problems that exist in 19th century studies.

For example, the 19th century invented the interior self and gave us the intense reality we now call “psychological,”⁷ and it is helpful for students to understand how much of our modern concept of the psyche is really fixed by 18th and 19th century notions. From the mid 18th century and the sentimental hero to Freud and the tri-partite conscious, there was a persistent exploration and mapping of the interior space of the human mind⁸—done as much in literature as in science. Ironically enough, this was done by using exterior space as much as anything. The late Eighteenth century was fond of Prospect poetry in which a Bard would stand on a promontory alone and contemplative of some vista. There the Bard would recognize his bond to common humanity and the power of nature; or she would comment on her essential difference from the

herd and the passage of time; or they would note the mutability of the seasons and odd pleasures of melancholy, while highlighting the aesthetic nature of changing light, perspective, and experience. The physical pose of an isolated figure, in a natural or man-made setting, engaged in contemplation and reflection, is an effective device for investigation of the emotions, feelings, enthusiasms, fears and hopes of a speaker—who, of course, speaks in such a manner that he or she is overhead and thereby communicates, some clearer understanding of both the speaker's and audience's emotions to an audience who is not at the physical site nor in the emotional state.

As it develops, this over-heard prospect device fragments into a number of narrative forms which increasingly map the interior and emotional space of human beings. The graveyard poem contemplates the brevity and glory of human life. The ruins poem contemplates the brevity of human history and culture and the long shank of time. The nature poem contemplates the magnificence and eternality of the universe vs. the brevity and insignificance of the human perspective. By reliance on what Edmund Burke popularized as the Sublime and the need to feel the overwhelming feelings that come in such contrastive contemplations of the wee, small individual against a larger whole, these narratives were able to clef a facet that marks both a high spiritual imagination and a dark imagination. They may give a temporary catharsis to folks in times of great social change⁹, but they also allow a wonderfully emotional indulgence in the unknown, the unseen, and the unrealized. With each sublime marker, a troublesome emotion is demarcated, but so is the dark side of things, nature, and folk; so there is always a depressive and frightening other side which has to be explored further because it is there and because it intrigues.

Of course, two of the most melancholy sorts of these narratives are the Crepuscular School of poetry (known also as the Twilight School or the Graveyard School of poetry) and the

Gothic novel. Here the visual and narrative prospect is specifically the twilight, the graveyard, the decayed ruin, and the rhetorical device is a newer form of *memento mori*. Yet, unlike the Middle Ages, the 19th century mind was not particularly reminded of mortality to prepare for the World to Come, rather it indulged in the emotions of loneliness, regret, grief, loss, isolation, and even terror. But, of course, the most persistent, and long-lived form of the dark side imagination has been the Gothic novel¹⁰. Those narratives of ruins, dungeons, tortures, ghosts, villains, monsters, and other terrors which also delight, found themselves, for a few years, at the center of literary pleasuring. They torqued the past into the contemporaneous, conflated the familial with the unfamiliar, and blended the personal with the public enough to remind us of the fears we face and can conquer. They gave a time and a space to enjoy the delightful shudders of our fears in a safe way.

However, delightful terror is basically oxymoronic both attracting us and repelling us, demarcating the good and the forbidden, and exploring the margins of culture, knowledge, and action. The dark imagination plays at the junction of the oxymoron of terrible beauty, or beautiful terror. It is the thrill/fear of boundaries and the source of the Sublime, and although it may be instructive, it is not necessarily safe. Whether it is the overwhelming intensity of light or dark, the wondrous perspective of time or size scale, the delicate balance between the legitimate and the forbidden, or the alluring edge between the known and the unknown¹¹, the dark imagination is what every child does when it is given a boundary—at least what my children did when they had a boundary, such as not going into the street. They would stand with toes hanging over the curb daring the boundary setter and ever so slightly, but securely testing the boundary and the unbounded on the other side. The dark imagination is, I believe, playing with the other side in curiosity, rebellion, terror, and delight—temporary chaos for a later greater good—order, stress,

release, or just plain fun. And once one realizes that the operative aspects of the Sublime is reaction and emotional intensity, it is quite easy to begin to play in the fields of beautiful terrors, and that seems to have been the history of the Gothic—a field where the oxymoronic (at least of things attractive and things repulsive) are not just possible, but continuous and contiguous.¹²

This Gothic field of play here is exactly the same as the stage space and cultural space where Aristotelian catharsis is supposed to take place. It is the boundaried, demarcated, enculturated, and above all, the controlled space where darker things can be contained and kept from breaking out and destroying the cultural order. At least such control is the aesthetic cliché explaining the potential, never-ending recursive that happens in art. However, Morris Peckham's contrary viewpoint is worth considering here; as he puts it (1967:314)

We rehearse for various roles all our lives, and for various patterns of behavior. We rehearse our national, our local, and our personal styles. These things we rehearse so that we may participate in a predicable world of social and environmental interaction. But we also must rehearse the power to perceive the failure, the necessary failure, of all those patterns of behavior. Art, as an adaptational mechanism, is reinforcement of the ability to be aware of the disparity between behavior pattern and the demands consequent upon the interaction with the environment. Art is rehearsal for those real situations in which it is vital for our survival to endure cognitive tension, to refuse the comforts of validation by affective congruence when such validation is inappropriate because too vital interest are at stake; art is the reinforcement of the capacity to endure disorientation so that a real and significant problem may emerge. Art is the exposure to the tensions and problems of a false world so that man may endure exposing himself to the tensions and problems of the real world.

Although here I think Peckham too easily makes art psycho-socially functional at the expense of truth and value, his point is well taken that art—particularly dark art and dark imagination—does help individuals to “endure cognitive tension”, or “to refuse the comforts of validation”, or “to endure disorientation”. But the help offered here is individual and not cultural or social, and the

help for the problem is always recursive, leaving one to come back again for more stimulation by “delightful shudders”. Of course, such a mixed bag of ambivalences is pretty well characteristic of how the gothic has been regarded by critics and by readers. The chief difference being how much one is concerned for the control of those dark elements and what those dark elements may do to the individual. Whereas the most conservative critics see this dark pattern as an assault upon the cultural norms to be resisted,¹³ the more liberal ones see this as an expression of elements which the cultural norm has repressed. Readers, or viewers, of course, probably don’t care either way, but find entertainment value and some expressive value in the products of the dark imagination protected by some ever changing and escalating boundary that limits what is perceived as “excess” or “dangerous”.¹⁴

At any rate, such dark devices, particularly as gothic techniques, actually build on the potentially non-socializing Romantic Ego, as interior space which allows the exploration of a hitherto unrecognized region of human behavior. Prospect poetry spatialized reflection and introspection, and as Wordsworth defined poetry, it is the space where “emotion [is] recollected in tranquility.” It gathers for individual inspection an enormous range of psychological states to be articulated, examined, understood and propagated; so it looks at odd things—the uncanny, to use Freud’s word, or the “queer” to use Wittgenstein’s. When Wordsworth¹⁵ and Coleridge set out, in the *Lyrical Ballads*, to cast a “common light” over things “supernatural” and a “supernatural light” on things common, they begin the Romantic attempt to deal with the dark imagination because they seek to find the “common” in the individual. When Keats walks with melancholy, when Shelley praises Mutability, or when Byron laughs at society’s venality, they are essentially setting up a space for both estrangement and familiarization, those narrative processes which are used to describe events in ways which are thought to be non-mimetic and

allow one to explore what reason has prohibited. Of course, such uses of the dark imagination do not stop with the Romantics, the Victorians extrapolate it into the persistent form of the spiritual autobiography, the crisis lyric, the place setting for the spoken monolog, and ultimately to the motivation of character which marks the modern psychological novel, but the thrust of this articulation is always an articulation of an interior space of an individual who is fore-grounded by its relation to Nature and to Society.

Thus, terror is as much of place as it is of character or action—the lonely place, in the dark, around the corner, behind the door where viewer/reader sees and anticipates the dread thing of which the actors seem only remotely aware. It is wild setting, the mental gloom, the foggy night, the darkened room, the fetid tunnel. These are the loci of our delightful shudders, and the Gothic novel, with all of its apparati, is a prime example of this process of interior space articulated by the use of exterior space. Whether it be the clinky trapdoors of *Udolpho*, the spooky castles of *Otronto*, the moral and mountainous disquisitions of *Frankenstein*, the projective angst of *Childe Rolland*, the dichotomies of *Jekyll and Hyde*, or the transformations of *Dracula*, the presence of space and of locality put the narrative at a point the reader can focus on the hopes, fears, or anxieties he or she may have—an almost purely projective screen where artist and audience do a participatory dance of those hopes, fears, and anxieties. The locus of the dark imagination is just a playground—clearly demarcated as a place where things that normally are not discussed are examined and explored—certainly for the delight, and perhaps the edification, of the participants, but the playground will, like all playgrounds, be more for the affective enjoyment of the participants than for the social well-being of the gatekeepers to the playground.

The Sublime and the Spooky

Ironically and wondrously the root of all this terror and horror is the Sublime and an attempt to understand the beautiful. In an attempt to emotionalize an over-ratiocinated world, the 18th and 19th centuries turned to the Doctrine of the Sublime as best expressed in Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1756). Some of the earlier expressions of the cultural shift may have been enthusiasm, Methodism, mysticism, and antiquarianism¹⁶, but the major vector for developing emotion was the Sublime, and that numinous response to the universe, is clearly marked with a darker side, which Burke (and others) continually try to articulate and control. His very distinction between the beautiful and the sublime tries to get at the affective power of certain emotional structures. His desire to find "invariable and certain laws" (1756: 80) that "affect" the imagination shows him concerned for things which are uncontrollable and out of the ordinary. Like Locke (and Peirce after him), Burke is concerned with how new things are generated and how they are to be judged. As he puts it, "... the imagination is the most extensive province of pleasure and pain, as it is the region of our fears and our hopes, and of all our passions that are connected with them;...." (87) Every new thing the imagination creates is affected by such things, and what we must do is discover how they operate. Later he goes on to say, "So far as the imagination and the passions are concerned, I believe it true, that reason is little consulted; but where disposition, where decorum, where congruity are concerned, in short, wherever the best taste differs from the worst, I convinced that the understanding operates," (98)

So Burke tries to articulate how the understanding can operate in a place where reason is not strong,¹⁷ but he begins his articulation by defining the sublime, which acts to circumvent reason: "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of *pain* and *danger*, that is to say,

whatever is in any way sort terrible, or conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.” (110) Burke then makes a distinction between pleasure and delight—the first being a positive emotion of its own, and the second being a emotion that happens when pain is relieved in some way; so he may qualify the sublime further as exempt from reason. He says:

The passions which belong to self-preservation turn on pain and danger; they are simply painful when their causes immediately affect us; they are delightful when we have an idea of pain and danger, without being actually in such circumstances; this delight I have not called pleasure, because it turns on pain, and become it is different enough from any idea of positive pleasure. What ever excites this delight, I call *sublime*. (125)

This delight is primarily “astonishment...a state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror.” (130) He continues:

No passion so effectively robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as *fear*. For fear being an apprehension of pain and death, it operates in a manner that resembles actual pain. Whatever therefore is terrible, with regard to sight, is sublime too, whether this cause of terror be endured with greatness of dimensions or not; for it is impossible to look on anything as trifling, or contemptible, that may be dangerous. (130)

This extended definition from Burke should make it clear that the Sublime is treated ambivalently—as a source of power and emotion cast against reason and social control. It delights, but it does so by a pattern of substituting verisimilitude since pain and danger are not “actually” present but only “resemble” them. It is not a “positive” pleasure, but a relational delight. That is, the Sublime is pretty much close to what I have called the Dark Imagination— a narrative device that suggests the marginal, the need to explore the marginal, and the need to control the marginal.

Categories and Maps of the Dark Imagination

Burke looks at the Sublime by listing a number of its categories¹⁸ for producing that delight. The list is telling for it draws a clear map of the places where the dark imagination is active. Fear is, of course as shown above, the *first* locus, for “Indeed terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently, the ruling principle of the Sublime.” (131) But generally “obscurity” is also necessary for terror, for when we do not know a situation or place, our imaginations are most active, and any sense of “clearness” is “an enemy to all enthusiasms whatsoever” (134) in such conditions. The *second* locus, after the dangerous and unclear, are those images which suggest “power”, for “In short, wheresoever we find strength, and in what lightsoever we look upon power, we shall all along observe the *sublime the concomitant of terror*, ...[emphasis mine].” (141) For the *third* locus, he connects all “general privations,” such as “vacuity, darkness, solitude, and silence” (146) with the sublime, for lack of the familiar seems to peak our curiosity and fear. In short, terror is produced by images of threat, obscurity, power, emptiness, darkness, solitude, and silence—the very devices of the gothic narrative.

The *fourth* locus is “vastness,” or “greatness” (147)—probably the best known of Burke’s characteristic. Here he is concerned with spatial extension “in length, height, or depth”, (147) but depth is the most affective and height the second most effective. He also allows that “extreme littleness is in some measure sublime; ...” (147), for “we become amazed and confounded at the wonders of minuteness;” The *fifth* locus is, of course, related to greatness, but since Burke believes it is the truest test of the sublime, he lists “infinity” as the fifth locus of “delightful horror”. (148) Although there are no true infinities in nature, the limitations of the sensory system suggest the possibility, and the “succession” of certain similarities of views and the uniformity of their parts gives us a “kind of artificial infinity”¹⁹. The fifth locus was the artificial

infinity of magnitude in building if the symmetry is appropriate because there is a kind of infinity in pleasing objects because the mind “is entertained by the promise of something more, and does not acquiesce in the present object of sense.” (153) The *sixth* locus is “difficulty [for] when any work seems to have required immense force and labor to effect it, the idea is grand” (153), and the *seventh* is magnificence—“a great profusion of things, which are splendid in themselves” (154)—whether they be stars, fireworks, or great works of art, the “exact coherence and agreement” of the profusion of things, events, or images produces a sense of the sublime. These loci of the sublime are clearly aimed at the spatial and the constructional—both in the sense of perspective and architecture. Again the Sublime is clearly a marker for the Gothic narrative.²⁰

The *eighth* locus moves more specifically to the senses, for this locus is light, or more specifically, its absence, for “darkness is more productive of sublime ideas than light” (156) except in those case where extreme light blots out vision as easily as darkness. So light works specifically in buildings as well; so that Burke pretty well, without using the term, defines a gothic castle as an example of the sublime: “... all edifices calculated to produce an idea of the sublime, ought rather to be dark and gloomy, and this for two reasons, the first is, that darkness itself on other occasions is known by the experience to have a greater effect than light. The second is, that to make an object striking, we should make it as different as possible form the objects with which we are immediately conversant ” (158) Of course, color, like light, effects the sublime too unless they are “soft and cheerful”; the highest degree of the sublime is produced by “sad and fuscous colors, as black, or brown, or deep purple and the like.” (159) The *ninth* locus of the sublime has to do with sounds: “excessive loudness”; “shouting of multitudes”; (159) the suddenness of a sound, particularly a forceful one, but also “a low, tremulous, intermitting sounds,” (160) or “the cries of animals”. (161) Of course, any of these sounds have

their sublime effect amplified in the dark. The *tenth* locus of the sublime is from smells and tastes, but their effect is minimal unless they are “excessive bitters, and intolerable stench.”

(162) These sensations however can be only “odious” and the test “by which the sublimity of an image is to be tried, not whether it becomes mean when associated with mean ideas; but whether it, when united with images of an allowed grandeur, the whole composition is supported with dignity.” (163)

These last loci deal primarily with the variant senses and their relations to terror, but Burke’s distinctions in the locus of smells and taste shows how clearly Burke wants to find the appropriate social context for discussing the delights shudders that come from the Sublime. Thus, at last Burke come to the position I mentioned earlier, the way to judge at least some of the loci of the sublime is by the purpose your classification. If it produces “dignity” then it is okay, but if not it is only “mean” or “odious.” So how one uses the instruments of terror, or how one approaches the loci of the delightful shudders, is the crux of the matter. Personally I am not so sure that “dignity” and “meanness” are poor criteria for judgment, but their social nature will demand an extended discussion on what “dignity” and “meanness” are and what are the consequences of the lack of the first and the presence of the second.

As long as we live with our creative brains, as long as we are imagining creatures, we will have to discuss the consequences of our narratives—dark, gothic, detective, sublime, social, or scientific. It is much as Roger Shattuck argues in his “exploration of the dark side of human ingenuity and imagination”, entitled *Forbidden Knowledge*, the history of the west has been a struggle between “liberation and limits.” Shattuck is fearful that our belief “that the free cultivation and circulation of ideas, opinions, and goods through all society (...) will in the long run promote our welfare” (1996: 6) is no longer working. By looking at the cautionary myths of

Prometheus, Pandora, *Frankenstein*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and by examining what he believes is a post-modern misreading of the Marquis De Sade, he uses the gothic and the dark imagination to illustrate that our social constructions may be destroying themselves and us. But I don't want to go that far—particularly with the dark imagination. The cautionary is certainly there, but the delight is also, and one needs to remember that the delight of the cautionary is as much the power of the dark imagination as are the things the dark imagination portrays. Knowledge of any sort is surely conditional rather than absolute, we do not live with the Ultimate Interpretant, and our knowledge—whether it is dark, gothic, sublime, social, criminal, or scientific—is, as Peirce argued, fabulistic and in the process of determination.

But how one regards this process of determination is telling. For example, Mishra, in *The Gothic Sublime* like any number of post moderns, is disturbed and angsted by the unsurity of semiotic evolution. As he expresses it in rather revealing psychoanalytic language:

“..., it is the sublime that regressively colonizes its descriptor. In the final analysis this is the terror of the sublime, the frighteningly contaminative force of the impossible idea itself. To collocate with the sublime, to cohabit with it, is to be faced with an instance of radical incommensurability. Of all the sublimes, the Gothic sublime (...) is most aware of this incommensurability and its inherent problems of transcendence. The Gothic subject never transcends, in this sense. Its self-empowerment, as the subject under the sign of the Gothic, always implies subservience to the trope. There is a pleasure of impotence in the face of the sublime. The sublime castrates, it humiliates by its (phallic) grandeur.” (1994: 40)

The problem is, if one returns the Freudian/Lacanian favor, holders of such views may have levers, but they have not place to put them. They would move the world, but they can't stick to a fulcrum—perhaps they should look in the dark without calling it lack and then the earth might move for them.

Apparently the cultural hegemony does not handle the lack of control very well. Rather one needs to remember that narratives, myths, and arguments don't just edify, they also construct

experience; stories don't just entertain us, they also delineate the past, present, and future for us; and narratives don't just attract audiences, they also explicate the story teller, the world perceived, and the culture in which it is perceived. One of the fundamental boundaries of myth is what I will call, the dark imagination, which plays at the line of demarcation between the upper world and the lower world, between the temporal and the sacred, between waking and sleep, between consciousness and unconsciousness, and between the known and the unknown. The dark imagination hovers at the boundaries between semiosis, and out of the shadows of our cultural knowledge comes those aspects of culture which we'd rather not know or do not yet know, and when they do not cause us surprise and laughter, they cause shock, fear, terror, and horror. But such emotions cannot long be sustained in a cultural setting without some mediation, and the trickster impulse transform them by game, illusion, and narrative into devices for transforming the un-enculturated or the de-culturated into items of culture, or at least items of non-culture that can be appropriated contained by some semiotic process of verisimilitude or deflection. For me, I prefer to remember the stories that begin:

Once upon a time, in a dark and strange place, there.....

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1 This article was originally published in Linda Rogers (Ed.) *Thirdspace and applied semiotics across the disciplines*. Madison, WI: Atwood Pres, 2003.

2 For example, James B. Twitchell's *Dreadful Pleasures* is detailed account of horror and modern horror films. But even though he is obviously fond of his subject, his psychological bent is to say: "The attraction of horror can be understood in essentially three ways: (1) as counterphobia or the satisfaction of overcoming objects of fear; (2) as 'the return of the repressed' or the compulsive projection of objects sublimated desire; and (3) as part of a more complicated rite of passage from onanism to reproductive sexuality." (1985: 65). Throughout his examination of the history of horror, he continually comes back to this third reason as though it were the "real" explanation of why folk might be attracted to such this stuff without any apparent awareness that his own interest in the Gothic is driven by something else altogether.

3 I would, of course, include detective mysteries in this category. In fact, they are often conflated, but when I first wrote this I was thinking mostly of gothic fiction.

4 It is fair, I think, to see detective narratives as "thrilling" – not just because "the game is afoot", as Holmes said, but because the narrative is a confrontation with "evil" that is both "thrilling" and "controlled."

5 In the critical literature, distinctions are often made between "terror" and "horror"—the first being something which is personally threatening, and the second being either an always dissonant mystery (Twitchell 1985: 16-18) or a vicarious threat. (Heller 1987: 19) Note that both of these are positivistic clichés, for it assumed that actual threat to a person is "terrific" and "real" whereas semiotically displaced threats are "horrific" and just "psychological". However, we all should recognize the play factor involved in frightening narratives or simulated experiences and know that users of such sign constructs do not necessarily make the same distinction, and probably critics should not do so either—at least not do so too quickly. Surely being frighten is a physiological stimulus response process, but to "play" with it is characteristic of something much more semiotically complex. To be Cartesian here is to fall for a too simple a semiotic reading of such structures.

6 This is probably true for critics' own cultural assumptions. If one does not, then the fear of chaos—dark, aesthetic, or barbaric—catches one in an existential semiotic crises where one really hears nothing, sees nothing, and says nothing like a Derridian sculpture of the three monkeys.

7 Although we moderns and post-moderns consider reason to be an interior operation, this was not the cultural norm of the Eighteenth Century. Reason then was public, general, and non-emotive, and the counter-corrective is to highlight the private, the particular (if not peculiar) and the emotional. Thus, we tend to get the common oppositional cliché of Enlightenment Reason vs Romantic Emotion, but I would argue that the contrariety is one more of public and exterior vs private and interior in order to comment upon a differently perceived notion of society's imperium.

8 In *The Gothic Sublime*, Vijay Mishra summarizes the history of the Gothic criticism to show how the Gothic world has been seen as "interiorized...into a private domain of neurotic sensibility" or read by William Patrick Day's as a "modern dilemma of the failure of self-definition..." (9) He touches on David Punter's reading of the Gothic as "transgressive texts" and Todorov's non-psychoanalytic formal discussion of the Fantastic, but he settles for a psychoanalytic view in which "...the Gothic sublime is a version of the Lacanain Real as 'the embodiment of a pure negativity' into which the subject inscribes itself as an absence, a lack of the structure itself." (17)

9 Of course, the assumption here is that the decline of an agrarian economy and the shift to an industrial one not only forces the movement of populations but also a change in their perceptions of themselves and their role in nature and society. To be industrialized is to be psychologized?

10 This is followed closely (some would say entwined with) by the detective story, the confessions narrative, and the crime exposes in the growing publishing industry of newspapers, serialization, magazine short stories, and penny dreadfuls.

11 Roger Shattuck describes this trait more negatively than I would as "the Wife of Bath effect": "We are discontent with our lot, whatever it is, just because it is ours. We covet what is not ours because it represents otherness. Following Montaigne, I have called this combination of perverse impulses 'soul error'...." (1996: 71)

12 The detection process is, of course, one of filtering the relevant from the irrelevant, the implicatory from the misleading,

appearance from reality, or the truth from the false. The detector is a questor for lost persons and lost things.

13 This is clearly seen in the public and political debates over fictional modes and their use of sex and violence: gothic novels in the 19th century or gothic films in the 20th, comic books, movies, television, music, the Internet, etc. Libertarians want no restrictions on expression and conservatives want some controls. It is by no means accidental that at the end of the 20th century, this often turns on a private vs. public space argument. Some of that is due to gambit strategies on the parts of both sides; some is due to our own traditions of free speech, but I think some of it is due to the fact that these devices are, by their very nature, articulators of private space in a public discourse, and that is the reason both sides draw this line over these issues.

14 This escalating boundary of excess is no simple problem. Such stimulations of the repressed side tend to become passé as one is exposed to them, and users of dark signs are often wont to seek bigger, better, and more thrilling uses. At what point this becomes a personal problem or a social problem is, of course, the subject of the debate between the Libertarians and Conservatives about private and public space.

15 As Mishra puts it: "Wordsworth is remarkably Kantian...and is conscious of the intersubjective nature of the sublime experience. One gains access to the sublime through self-contemplation, unrestrained by other demands and imperatives. The subject may be sovereign, but he or she is nevertheless pushed by the sublime toward a redefinition of his or her sovereignty by the need to confront his or her own incompleteness in the presence of limitlessness, turbulent and ungraspable." (1994: 35)

16 Antiquarianism has its roots in the growing nationalism of the 16th and 17th centuries. It was recognition of the importance of the history of a specific locale, but it also fed into the 19th century medieval revivals by use of prospect poetry at ruins, the Romantic desire for sensuality, and the Victorian struggle with change. Thus, the late 19th century produces the neo-gothic revival in architecture and poetry that addresses both nostalgia for simpler times and projection of values on to that same nostalgic structure.

17 This is, of course, the nightmare worry of any neocon – their "reason" is subject to some "emotion" and one had better be cautious. Moreover, it is worth considering how detective narratives play out in terms of conservative and liberal notions of society. Surely, there is something of a mapping of class struggle here.

18 One could, of course, use Todorov's division of the Fantastic into the categories of the fantastic, the uncanny, and the marvelous. Several critics have applied his classification as a device for commenting on the significance of the Gothic. According to Todorov, the fantastic deals with

"...a world [which] is indeed our world, the one we know, a world without devils, sylphides, or vampires, [but] there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of the same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the sense, of a product of the imagination—and laws of the world then remain what they are; or else, the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality—but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us. Either the devils is an illusion, an imaginary being; or else he really exists, precisely like other beings—with this reservation, that we encounter him infrequently. The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event." (1973: 25)

But Burke's categories seem to be closer to the 19th century and the origins of Gothic or detective fiction, and therefore I prefer to use them.

19 Burke mentions specifically rotundas and ancient heathen temples, and this locus with the next one of "magnitude in building" is probably the rationale for the use of the term "Gothic" as both a medieval art form and a literary term. Apparently the 17th and 18th centuries, followed by the 19th and 20th centuries, were impressed with what they perceived as sublime, primitive structures in the Gothic cathedrals or in ruins like Stonehenge. Their historical sense, of the not contemporary, caused them to identify such structures with the generically primitive, the Goths—thus the term Gothic as a descriptor of "primitive" and "medieval" structures and situations. (See Bayer-Berenbaum 1982: 47-72 or Punter 1996: 4-8)

20 I think these Burkean characteristics of perspective are easily seen in *film noir*. What, after all, is detective fiction but instruction in perception or redirection?